

Luther accepted the social hierarchy, with its principles of status and subordination, though he knocked away the ecclesiastical rungs in the ladder. The combination of religious radicalism and economic conservatism is not uncommon, and in the traditional conception of society, as an organism of unequal classes with different rights and functions, the fathers of all later revolutions found an arsenal of arguments against change, which he launched with almost equal fury against revolting peasants and grasping monopolists. His vindication of the spiritual freedom of common men, and his outspoken abuse of the German princes, had naturally been taken at their face value by serfs groaning under the odious tyranny, and, when the inevitable rising came, the rage of Luther, like that of Burke in another age, was sharpened by embarrassment at what seemed to him a hideous parody of truths which were both sacred and his own. As fully convinced as any mediaeval writer that serfdom was the necessary foundation of society, his alarm at the attempt to abolish it was intensified by a political theory which exalted the absolutism of secular authorities, and a religious doctrine which drew a sharp antithesis between the external order and the life of the spirit. The demand of the peasants that villeinage

should end, because " Christ has delivered
and redeemed
us all, the lowly as well as the great, without
exception,
by the shedding of His precious blood,"¹⁸
horrificed him,
partly as portending an orgy of anarchy,
partly because
it was likely to be confused with and to
prejudice, as
in fact it did, the Reformation movement,
partly
because (as he thought) it degraded the
Gospel by turning
a spiritual message into a programme of
social reconstruction? " This article would make all
men equal
and so change the spiritual kingdom of
Christ into an
external worldly one. Impossible ! An
earthly kingdom
cannot exist without inequality of
persons, some
must be free, others serfs, some rulers,
others subjects.